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Finishing the Task? A Cautionary Analysis of Missionary Language

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, technological advances and transportation opportunities have made it conceivable for the first time in history that a single generation of Christians might be able to both access and evangelize all of the world's peoples. To this end, missionary agencies have employed mottos such as "Finish the Task" to rally Christians to complete the work of world evangelization. Often such efforts are connected to Matt 24:14 where Jesus promises that the gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all nations before the eschaton. Such mottos imply that the missionary task is coterminous with world evangelization. Yet the Great Commission of Matt 28:18–20 will not allow for such a reduced conception of the essential missionary task. While world evangelization is a vital component of the Great Commission, missions strategies must not allow the promise of Jesus to distract from full obedience to his command.

Key Words: disciple-making, Great Commission, irreducible missionary task, missions, world evangelization

Introduction

In Genesis 12 Abraham receives the promise that his offspring will be a blessing to the nations. Revelation 7:9 provides a picture of the future consummation of this promise. In this passage, men and women of every nation, and all tribes, peoples, and languages surround God's throne shouting praises to him whom they call "our Lord." This vision is part of the great Christian hope that has sustained believers from the earliest days of its writing. It is a vision that many have expected to dawn in their day. Today, many continue to expect the Lord's imminent return, suggesting that the Great Commission might soon be finished and will usher in Christ's return.

In the foreword of his book *Then the End Will Come*, Jim Montgomery, founder of DAWN ministries, writes, "For as I look at what is happening in the Church and in the world, I feel the prophetic word welling up within me that the consummation of the age is at hand. It is within our grasp to actually complete the Great Commission and thereby pave the

way for the return of the Lord.”¹ In similar fashion, Steve Smith, the author of T4T, writes, “The completion of Mt. 24:14 is approaching: This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and THEN THE END WILL COME!”²

These sentiments are pervasive in missions literature through the words of prolific theologians, missiologists, and missions strategists who espouse similar ideas about the completion or finishing of the task of the Great Commission.³ With all of the information, technology, and transportation available to believers today, it is not only conceivable that every people group might be reached, but actually possible for perhaps the first time in history.⁴ It is hard not to join wholeheartedly in the excitement of these men and women as they urge the church forward, just as a marathon runner who can see the finish line approaching summons all her reserves of energy, in order to finish the evangelization of the world with a flourish.

However, a caution might yet be in order. The church has not been given the task of mere world evangelization. Grander than this, she has been given the task of making disciples of all nations. Mathew 24:14, the verse cited by Smith above, promises that world evangelization will occur, yet the completion of world evangelization is not coterminous with the completion of the missionary task left to the church. Matthew 28:18–20 calls the church to a task that cannot be completed until Christ’s return. This paper will argue that confusing the promise of Matt 24:14 with the command of Matt 28:18–20 can result in a diminution of the missionary task. To this point, it would seem that missions mottos such as “Finish the Task” and “Bring back the King” could distract from the essential

¹ Jim Montgomery, *Then the End Will Come* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1997).

² Steve Smith, “No Place Left Novel: Hastening,” [noplacelleft.net, http://noplacelleft.net/tag/steve-smith/](http://noplacelleft.net/tag/steve-smith/).

³ Cf. John Piper and David Mathis, eds., *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 531–46; Edgar J. Elliston and Stephen E. Burris, eds., *Completing the Task: Reaching the World for Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995); Rondal Smith, “Finishing the Task,” in *Completing the Task: Reaching the World for Christ*, ed. Edgar J. Elliston and Stephen E. Burris (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 115–36; Montgomery, *Then the End Will Come*.

⁴ Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” 531–46.

missionary task as given in the Great Commission.⁵

In order to demonstrate this claim, a brief historical survey of missiological developments since 1900 will be conducted. Following the survey, this paper will investigate what is written in Matt 24:14 and Matt 28:16–20. Finally, this study will conclude with some suggestions as to how missiological tools and strategies might be analyzed, not for their capacity to complete the Great Commission, but for their contribution to Great Commission obedience.

“Finish the Task”: Historical Development

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, great effort has been directed toward the completion of world evangelization. A grassroots movement calling itself the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) began around the motto, “The evangelization of the world in this generation.”⁶ Around the same time as this missions emphasis was developing, the Scofield Reference Bible was published.⁷ Partly due to the popularity of this dispensational study of the Bible, various influential voices in the United States wed the concepts of world evangelism and dispensational premillennial eschatology.⁸ This particular view of the end times expects the imminent return of Christ prior to the thousand-year reign of Christ’s kingdom on earth. One of the signs of Christ’s coming is world evangelization, as promised in Matt 24:14.⁹ Thus, some efforts towards world evangelization simultaneously became efforts to “Bring back the King.”¹⁰

While not all those focusing on world evangelization were premillennialists, nor were all premillennialists dispensationalists, this theological perspective paired particularly well with missions excitement such that, “It is impossible to fully appreciate the twin emphases on world evangelization and the Second Coming in closure strategies of the nineteenth

⁵ David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 288. Hesselgrave is here citing a list of such mottos as compiled by Todd M. Johnson, director of the World Evangelization Research Center.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 455.

⁸ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 284.

⁹ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 455.

¹⁰ David M. Sills, *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 18. Sills notes that entire strategies focus on the idea that reaching all people groups will bring Jesus back.

and twentieth centuries apart from dispensational premillennialism.”¹¹ The excitement of seeing Christ proclaimed in every territory in the near future coupled with the idea that world evangelization would “bring back the King” led many missionaries and missions agencies to put their resources exclusively towards “providing all people with the opportunity to hear the Gospel.”¹²

Unoccupied Fields

Building on this growing interest in missions, a major conference was held in 1910 in Edinburgh, bringing missionary delegates together representing missions work around the globe.¹³ This conference focused on “unoccupied fields” that would need to be targeted in order to finish the job of world evangelization.¹⁴ The conference resulted in a fresh effort among missions agencies to establish a Christian presence in lands and territories that currently had none.¹⁵

πάντα τὰ ἔθνη

In the years between the Edinburgh 1910 conference and what would be another landmark conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974, many missions agencies advanced into territories formerly unreached with the primary goal of evangelization.¹⁶ However, as would be pointed out by Ralph Winter in Lausanne, the Greek root translated “nations” (ἔθνη) in both Matt 24:14 and 28:18–20 means much more than the individuals living within geo-political boundaries: “[ἔθνη] points to the ethnicities, the languages and the extended families which constitute the peoples of the earth.”¹⁷ Geo-political territories often contain many of these people groups, each of which must be able to receive the gospel in a linguistically and culturally meaningful way.

Ever since Winter brought this ethno-linguistic, relationally-based “people group” concept to the fore of evangelical missiology, much time and research has gone into the process of charting the number of those

¹¹ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 283, 286.

¹² David J. Hesselgrave, *Today's Choices for Tomorrow's Mission: An Evangelical Perspective on Trends and Issues in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1988), 49.

¹³ Zane G. Pratt, Michael David Sills, and Jeffrey Kirk Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 127.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 396.

¹⁷ Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” 533.

people groups who are yet unreached.¹⁸ Organizations like the Joshua Project have provided the world with an up-to-date listing of known people groups along with noting which are engaged with the gospel, which have been “reached” with the gospel, and which remain without a known gospel witness.¹⁹ These are all helpful developments that bring clarity to the cultural and ethnic realities present in the world in which we live. The Joshua Project sheds light on the peoples of the world—wherever they are and whoever may surround them—who are yet in need of the gospel and the opportunity to become disciples of Christ.

Matthew 24:14 and the Missionary Task

Despite this appropriate enthusiasm for the idea that the ends of the earth could soon hear the gospel, there remains a troubling conflation of promise and command in some of the literature. This conflation can lead to an overemphasis on rapidly reaching the unreached with the gospel, often at the expense of full obedience to the command to make disciples and to teach them to obey all that Christ commands.²⁰ The missionary task becomes reaching, with robust teaching being jettisoned as of secondary priority. In part, this may be due to missions strategies that root themselves in Matt 24:14, seeing in it a command to evangelize all the earth’s peoples.

Winter provides a clear example of this conflation when he writes, “What matters most is not that the peoples can be *counted*, but that God has given us a task that can be *completed*.”²¹ Again, he states, “Matthew 24:14 makes it clear that we must make it our first priority to see that every people has a living testimony of the gospel of the kingdom. . . . [the irreducible, essential mission task] is in fact the only task given to his people that actually has a completable dimension to it.”²² Here, in a discussion

¹⁸ Harold Fickett, “A Genius for God: Ralph Winter’s Recasting of World Evangelization,” *Int. J. Front. Missiology* 31.2 (2014): 85; Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 188–92.

¹⁹ The Joshua Project, “Bringing Definition to the Unfinished Task,” <https://joshuaproject.net>.

²⁰ Cf. Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 15; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 397; Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 78. Contra Garrison, Ott and Wilson prioritize healthy over merely rapid reproduction of churches.

²¹ Winter and Koch, “Finishing the Task,” 533.

²² *Ibid.*, 534, 539. It should be noted that Winter is here speaking of a people-movement to Christ, which is a forerunner to the idea of CPMs. Elsewhere Winter is more robust in his understanding of the missionary task, but in this article

of Matt 24:14, Winter refers to the task left to the church to complete: evangelization of the world's peoples. As this essay intends to demonstrate, however, world evangelization is but a partial aspect of the missions task given in the Great Commission.

This survey has shown that the trend toward using Matt 24:14 as a chair text for evangelical missions began long ago. As David Bosch records, "During the second half of the nineteenth century several missionary leaders and the mission organizations they founded . . . began to use Matthew 24:14 as the major 'missionary text'. Christ's return was now understood as being dependent upon the successful completion of the missionary task."²³ One sees this trend, then, in the progression from the SVM and dispensational premillennialism through Edinburgh and to Lausanne. Still today, a global network of missions agencies called "Student Volunteer Movement 2" (SVM2) exhibits this tendency clearly, claiming that "the fulfillment of the Great Commission centers primarily around Jesus' teaching in Matthew 24:14."²⁴

Surely evangelism is a first step toward discipleship, church planting, and teaching believers to obey all that Christ commanded. Likewise, it is right that Christians should be motivated to go anywhere to bring the saving gospel of Jesus to all who are perishing without it. It is fitting that urgency to proclaim God's goodness to everyone should undergird strategy. However, if, in an attempt to hasten the promise made, one's strategy or method drifts abroad of robust obedience to the full command given in Christ's commission, readjustment is required.

Exegesis: Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:18–20

For evangelicals committed to a high view of biblical authority, it is of utmost importance that one looks closely at the texts employed to set one's missiological strategy. The following exegetical summary will investigate the two pertinent passages in Matthew referenced in this discussion in order to determine what each might have to offer to missions strategy.

The Promise of Matthew 24:14

καὶ κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, καὶ τότε ἔξει τὸ τέλος.

This passage is one that rightly evokes excitement and gratitude in a

he draws it, troublingly, from Matt 24:14.

²³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 316.

²⁴ "Student Volunteer Movement 2," *SVM2.com*, <http://www.svm2.net/about-us/what-is-the-great-commission/>.

Christian reader. God is not willing that the end might come prior to the gospel of the kingdom being proclaimed throughout the whole world and to its people. In the midst of the dark picture of the future that Jesus paints surrounding this passage, there is yet this ray of hope demonstrating that he is sovereign. For anyone moved with compassion over the plight of those who are without a chance to hear, this message gives solace.

It is no wonder that this passage finds a place in missiological writings and missions text books. However, what is seen here is a promise of what will be, not a command. Likewise, this verse gives one of the larger pericope's nine necessary conditions that will precede the return of the Lord, but it does not necessarily exhaust the sufficient conditions, nor does it require the immediate return of the Lord upon its completion.²⁵ A brief discussion of the passage will reveal that it is not intended to bear the weight of the missions mandate left to the church by Jesus.

The Promise

In Matt 24:3–14, Matthew records Jesus' answer to his disciples' question, "What will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" (Matt 24:3b). Jesus proceeds to list nine types of events that will mark the period before Jesus' return. Eight of these signs are negative, ranging from "wars and rumors of wars" to false teachers and even to individual persecution and martyrdom of believers (Matt 24:4–14). However, ending this list of negative signs, Jesus includes the bright hope that the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world. It is important to note that the word *κηρυχθήσεται* is a future passive verb meaning "will be proclaimed."²⁶ As a passive verb, this indicates a condition which will attain while not focusing on the causal agent.

In Matthew, one can see a progression from Jesus' own preaching of the gospel of the kingdom to the preaching that will occur within the ". . . postresurrection ministry of the disciples."²⁷ Although this is true, the disciples are not given their commission to preach the gospel to all nations, nor the instructions as to how they are to go about making disciples, until Matt 28:18–20.²⁸ Here in Jesus' pre-crucifixion answer to his

²⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 356. Blomberg claims that in fact, all nine of the "signs of the times" had occurred by AD 70.

²⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 855.

²⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 966.

²⁸ In fact, in Matt 10:5–15, as Jesus sends the disciples out to proclaim the

disciples, his answer is given as a foretelling of what will happen, not yet as a command that his disciples obey. In fact, in his commentary on Matt 24:14, John Nolland shows that “the emphasis falls on the place of the preaching in the unfolding of the destined future rather than on the responsibility of the disciples for the preaching (contrast 28:19–20).”²⁹ That responsibility, and the means by which it is to be carried out, is yet to come in Jesus’ final instructions given in the Great Commission.

The Kingdom, the Testimony & the Nations

Another issue for consideration in this passage is the content that will be proclaimed. Jesus says that the gospel of the kingdom (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας) will be preached as a testimony to/against the whole world (ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν).³⁰ Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to explain what exactly the kingdom is. However, it will suffice to say that the gospel of the kingdom contains much more than evangelism often includes.³¹

Around the time of Lausanne, the idea of the kingdom was much debated as to whether it was primarily concerned with the spiritual condition of humankind or the physical and social conditions.³² Although much more needs to be said regarding this point, it seems best to recognize that the gospel of the kingdom as demonstrated and proclaimed by Jesus will not permit such a division and requires “a full-orbed gospel of the irrupting reign of God not only in individual lives but also in society.”³³

Thus, even if this passage were to be construed as a missions mandate, the content of gospel of the kingdom must be such that it starts with, but goes far beyond, personal salvation. It must also speak to all areas of life, private and public, forming churches that serve as kingdom communities where disciples are made and equipped to be disciple makers and kingdom

kingdom of heaven, they are explicitly told not to go to the Gentiles/nations (εἰς ὁδὸν ἐθνῶν μὴ ἀπέλθῃτε).

²⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 966.

³⁰ Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew*, Holman New Testament Commentary 1 (Nashville: B&H, 2000), 399. “The testimony served two purposes simultaneously: (1) it could win the listener over, and (2) it could condemn the guilty.”

³¹ Cf. Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

³² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

³³ *Ibid.*

citizens.³⁴ The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is thus all-encompassing. Missions methods and strategies that would strip away non-essential elements in order to increase speed and spread must wrestle with this reality as they seek to discover an irreducible definition of missions.

Additionally, Jesus' promise may not be as wholly positive as it is sometimes portrayed. The construction of the phrase "as a testimony to all nations" (εἰς μαρτύριον πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) contains a dative preposition (εἰς) which can be rendered "to" or "against."³⁵ While there is likely a dual sense to this idea of witnessing to and against the nations, it must be noted that Jesus' promise does not here give any indication as to how the nations will receive the proclamation. This proclamation to the whole inhabited world may be effective in winning the nations over, yet it could be seen to justify the condemnation of the guilty.³⁶

Through all of this analysis, it remains clear that Jesus' message is one of promise. Amid the trials and tribulations which are to be expected, God's justice will be upheld and his goodness will be proclaimed throughout the world by way of the gospel of the kingdom. While there will be tasks given to Jesus' disciples that may play a role in God's orchestration of these events, they are not given here in Matt 24:14.

And Then the End Will Come

Finally, one may yet wonder if the phrase "and then the end will come" (καὶ τότε ἔξει τὸ τέλος) means that Christ's return will immediately follow the evangelization of the final people group. Does Matt 24:14, then, give the church a mandate for world evangelization as a way as to "Bring back the King?" Or, as Hesselgrave quips, "If we go in force, will He come in haste?"³⁷

Several commentators claim that it is not necessary to see this statement as indicating an immediate sequence of events following some final evangelistic encounter. As Nolland writes of this phrase, "Clearly there is nothing here that is intended to have predictive power. . . . The concern is rather to assert the Matthean understanding that the significance of the

³⁴ Bruce Riley Ashford, "The Church in the Mission of God," in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 260. Ashford uses the analogy of a wheel wherein the hub of the wheel is evangelism and the rim is social engagement. Both are necessary for the church's holistic, "gospel of the kingdom" mission.

³⁵ Osborne, *Matthew*, 877.

³⁶ Weber, *Matthew*, 399.

³⁷ Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, 279.

period between the resurrection and the Parousia is a period defined by universal mission.”³⁸ In other words, Jesus is not telling the disciples about a sequence of events that will cause a chain reaction. Much less can he be seen to be instructing them as to how to affect his return. Instead Jesus’ intent is to reveal that the “end of the ages” is to be a time that will be marked both by tribulation and by universal mission: “This does not mean that all the nations will be converted before the end can come but rather that the universal proclamation will continue until the end.”³⁹

Agreeing with this, several authors see the events predicted by Jesus as having already occurred in history. Eckhard Schnabel observes, “The church today is not waiting for these signs to begin to appear. They began in the first century, already observed by Jesus’ disciples.”⁴⁰ Craig Blomberg states, “All nine of these preliminary events in fact occurred before A.D. 70, though most if not all have recurred many times since then as well.”⁴¹ Schnabel sees the evangelism of the known world at the time as the gospel of the kingdom had reached Spain in the west, Scythia in the north, India in the west, and Ethiopia in the south.⁴² Blomberg cites Paul’s claim in Rom 10:18 that the gospel had already reached the whole inhabited world as being sufficient to meet the criteria of Christ’s promise in Matt 24:14.⁴³ Jesus, then, could return at any time.

Ultimately, even if one were to read this verse as a key to “Bringing back the King,” the point remains that Jesus has not here instructed his disciples to pursue or effect his return. Much more clearly, Jesus has spoken of the mysterious timing of the Parousia (cf. Matt 24:36, 44; 25:13). Much more clearly has he spoken of the command and commission he intends for his disciples to obey (Matt 28:18–20). Preaching the gospel to all nations is a part of that which is eventually commanded at the end of Matthew’s Gospel. It is the first stage in the more extensive, ongoing task of making disciples of all nations and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commands. As a part of a larger command, then, its completion does not

³⁸ Nolland, *Matthew*, 967.

³⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 877.

⁴⁰ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *40 Questions about the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 47.

⁴¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 356.

⁴² Schnabel, *40 Questions about the End Times*, 38.

⁴³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 356. While contemporary understandings of “people groups” would likely consider Paul’s statement to be hyperbole, Blomberg does well to call the reader’s attention to Matt 24:34, where Jesus says that these things will happen before this generation passes away, saying, “It is crucial to observe the fulfillment of all these preliminary events prior to A.D. 70. This fulfillment will explain how 24:34 can be true.”

exhaust the task to which the church has been called.

Matthew 24:14 is a promise, not a command. As a promise, it gives strategists and missionaries sure knowledge that disciple-making labor among the nations is not in vain. Yet it behooves the missionary, missiologist, and pastor to consider this passage as it stands and for what it is prior to building strategies thereupon. The command given to the disciples—and the means by which the promise of Matt 24:14 might be realized—comes after Jesus' resurrection, four chapters later in Matt 28:18–20. To that command this paper now turns.

The Command of Matthew 28:18–20

καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς λέγων, Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς.¹⁹ πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, ²⁰ διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν· καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.

Long considered to be a key text in evangelical missiology, the so-called Great Commission as stated in Matthew is often cited as the chair text for missions work, though it is certainly more than a proof-text.⁴⁴ As noted by David Mathis, Matt 28:18–20 “is part of a biblical symphony spanning the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. From creation, God has been concerned with ‘all the nations.’”⁴⁵ While the Great Commission may not exhaust the mission for which the church remains on earth, the church's mission is certainly not less than what is contained therein. To that end it this paper will investigate the passage in order to illumine something of a minimum definition of the church's role in order to determine whether or not the missions motto, “Finish the Mission” is appropriate in light of Matt 28:18–20.

The Command

The central verb in this famous verse can at times get lost in the English translations. Where the English versions tend to place the aorist participle “go” (πορευθέντες) prior to the imperative “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε), the command to “make disciples” is in fact the main

⁴⁴ David Bosch, “The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16–20,” in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 218–20.

⁴⁵ David Mathis, “Introduction: Remember, Jesus Never Lies,” in *Finish the Mission*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 18.

verb.⁴⁶ As disciple-making is the task given here, Weber explains, “At the heart of our mission is the reproduction in others of what Jesus has produced in us: faith, obedience, growth, authority, compassion, love, and a bold, truthful message as his witnesses.”⁴⁷

On this grammatical basis, some argue that the English verb should be “going” as a reference to one’s everyday activities as the context for one’s obedience to the main verb, “make disciples.”⁴⁸ However, as explained by Köstenberger and O’Brien, “The aorist participle ‘go’ (*poreuthentes*) modifies the aorist imperative ‘make disciples’ (*matheteusate*) as an auxiliary reinforcing the action of the main verb” and in so doing, it contains a “mild imperatival force.”⁴⁹ Likewise, Osborne notes Matthew’s habit of pairing a participial “‘go’ as an introductory circumstantial participle that is rightly translated as coordinate to the main verb.”⁵⁰ Thus, “Jesus was commanding his followers to go as well as to make disciples, though the emphasis falls on the making of disciples.”⁵¹ Indeed, as this passage includes the phrase “all nations” (*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*), “going,” at least for some, will be a necessary aspect of obedience.

The command to make disciples is clearly given, though its implementation is no simple thing.⁵² Qualifying this main verb is another participial phrase, “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”⁵³ Köstenberger unpacks this, saying, “Mission entails the nurturing of converts into the full obedience of faith, not merely the proclamation of the Gospel.”⁵⁴ Where some missiologists would separate the task of “discipling” from the process of “perfecting,” this passage will not admit of this distinction.⁵⁵ As disciples themselves are ever-growing, so might the task

⁴⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

⁴⁷ Weber, *Matthew*, 484.

⁴⁸ Morris, *Matthew*, 746n.30.

⁴⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter Thomas O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 103–4.

⁵⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

⁵¹ Morris, *Matthew*, 746n.30.

⁵² Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 50.

⁵³ Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 105.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁵ Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1981), 15. McGavran divides these concepts; Bosch demonstrates the division to be untenable in “The Structure of Mission,” 221.

of making disciples be seen as a process that will not end until Jesus returns.

While this command, then, certainly includes both “go” and “proclaim” elements, it is not limited only to these, but it insists on the making of disciples, the planting of churches, and the teaching of obedience to all that Jesus has commanded. This teaching includes Jesus’ central teaching on the kingdom of God, which cannot simply be understood as the message of how one might find personal salvation.⁵⁶ An investigation of the rest of the passage will bear this out.

The Content

As noted above, Jesus’ command to “Go and make disciples” is not a bare command given devoid of content. Matthew 28:18–20 includes two additional participial clauses that shed further light on how one is to make disciples: baptizing (βαπτίζοντες) and teaching (διδάσκοντες). Clearly, as those disciplined by Jesus themselves, the eleven disciples understood something of what making disciples might entail. While an investigation of the narratives of the disciples’ personal experiences of being disciplined by Jesus might prove fruitful, this study will limit itself to the implications of these two participles and the phrases of which they are part.

Baptism and Ecclesiological Implications. The first participial clause that sheds light on how the eleven disciples are instructed to “Go and make disciples of all nations” is “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος). The Trinitarian formula identifies clearly the fact that this is explicitly Christian baptism, a symbol of entrance into the people of God by way of God’s own tri-personal name.⁵⁷

As a sign or sacrament symbolizing the entrance into God’s family, baptism implies an intimate relationship with the community of God’s people. Indeed, many see this command to baptize disciples as being directly tied to churches into which the new disciples are baptized and integrated.⁵⁸ With this understanding in mind, then, Russell Moore can claim that “a theology of the Great Commission is inextricably tied up with a

⁵⁶ David J. Bosch, “The Structure of Mission,” 246.

⁵⁷ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 230. McGrath shows that this formula itself was cited in the formulation of the Trinity by Athanasius and others.

⁵⁸ Cf. John Hammett, “The What and How of Church Membership,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Jonathan Leeman and Mark E. Dever (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 192.

theology of the church.”⁵⁹ Likewise, Köstenberger and O’Brien emphasize that in the New Testament, “conversion to Christ meant incorporation into a Christian community.”⁶⁰ The command to baptize, here, as an ordinance of the church, can be understood to assume church formation and planting as a part of the Great Commission itself. The second participle gives even further instructions on disciple-making.

Teaching Total Obedience. The addition of the phrase, “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” (διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν) sets the disciple-making and church planting standard. Jesus does not give his disciples permission to set aside aspects of his teaching in order to streamline their task or to speed its spread. Instead, as Jesus himself claimed that his own ministry would not allow a jot or a tittle of the law to fall away, he holds his disciples as disciple-makers to the same standard of upholding his commands (Matt 5:18).

This is not always reflected in missions strategies. Often, between the difficulty of inter-cultural communication and the desire for reproducible models that rapidly multiply, aspects of Jesus’ teaching go unaddressed.⁶¹ For example, in Donald McGavran’s influential early work, *The Bridges of God*, McGavran puts off much of Jesus’ ethical teaching by distinguishing between “discipling” and “perfecting.” He describes this division by saying, “In discipling, the full understanding of Christ is not the all-important factor, which is simply that He be recognized by the community as their sole spiritual Sovereign.”⁶²

In so doing, McGavran—and many who follow in his stead—declares the discipleship stage to be finished (and thus “finishable”) once Jesus is seen as a community’s leader. The assumption, then, is that the work of the Great Commission is done among this people, and sanctification (or “perfecting” in McGavran’s terminology) will continue either with or without the missionary’s teaching.

There is, however, no textual warrant for redefining discipleship or for the bifurcation of discipling and perfecting. This is not a tenable position when considering the command of Matt 28:18–20, particularly in light of

⁵⁹ Russell D. Moore, “Theology Bleeds: Why Theological Vision Matters for the Great Commission and Vice Versa,” in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God’s Mandate in Our Time*, ed. Charles E. Lawless and Adam Wade Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 117.

⁶⁰ Köstenberger and O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, 268.

⁶¹ Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 32.

⁶² Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1981), 15.

the second clause, which requires teaching total obedience.⁶³ Contra McGavran's definition of discipling, David Mathis writes, "'Disciple' refers not merely to conversion and personal spiritual maturity but to the personal investment of the discipler's life in others."⁶⁴ Likewise, Chan and Beuving explain that "teaching people to obey Jesus's commands is an enormous task. . . . We are never really 'done.' . . . We never finish the discipleship process."⁶⁵ Despite the grand scope of the process of making disciples, Matt 28:18–20 insists that this is the task to which the church has been commissioned.

David Sills summarizes well what has been seen in this study, saying, "The Great Commission is not just about witnessing or church planting. Jesus said to *make disciples* of the ethnic groups of the world, and to do so *by teaching them to observe all that He commanded us* (Matthew 28:19–20)."⁶⁶ Evangelism, church planting, discipleship, and teaching total obedience are bound up together in the command left to the church in the Great Commission. It might be noted that there is more that can be said biblically regarding the mission of the church. However, as the church strategizes about how to make disciples of all the peoples of the world, she will do well to remember that her task is not less than full obedience to the Great Commission.

Summary

To the degree that the pursuit of world evangelization is a first step, leading to deep, full disciple-making discipleship and consequent church planting of "kingdom outpost" churches, let the church throw herself towards the strategic targeting of the unreached. However, to the degree that world evangelization as a task draws the church's attention away from the robust disciple-making process of the Great Commission, let the church reconfigure her methodologies to reflect the command with which she has been entrusted rather than the promises which are God's to ensure. Likewise, if missions mottos serve to give the impression that the task of missions is less than making life-long disciple-makers, the mottos too must be discarded.

As has been shown, if Matt 24:14 is taken as the basis for missions strategy, one runs the risk of screening out the emphasis Jesus puts on

⁶³ David J. Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16–20," in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 46.

⁶⁴ Mathis, "Introduction: Remember, Jesus Never Lies," 18, 20.

⁶⁵ Francis Chan and Mark Beuving, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2012), 32.

⁶⁶ Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 29).

discipleship, church planting, and teaching. While world evangelism should certainly be part of the goal of missions strategies, the whole command of Matt 28:18–20 given to the church must be taken into account in assessment of appropriate tools, strategies, and methodologies. Though world evangelism might move faster from a human standpoint if strategies are stripped of the expectation of substantive teaching and life-on-life discipleship, it would do so at the expense of Great Commission obedience. Having studied the relevant texts, it will now be helpful to consider some practical aspects of missions strategy in light of Matt 28:18–20.

Methods, Tools, and Strategies

At this point one might claim that very few, if any, missiologists would hesitate to endorse discipleship as a centerpiece of missionary strategy. That may be true. In fact, many of those most concerned with rapid reproduction within church planting movements readily use the family of words related to “discipleship.” However, as noted above, occasionally one sees a redefinition of the word “disciple” so as not to impede the speed of a movement.⁶⁷ This essay has taken the position that such a move is unwarranted and untenable.

The process of discipleship is ongoing and life-long. Believers will only complete their discipleship upon death or the return of Christ.⁶⁸ Likewise, while locations and people groups may change throughout one’s life, the Great Commission call to be a disciple-maker is also endless. One day, prior to the return of Christ, the gospel of the kingdom will have been proclaimed throughout the whole world and to its peoples. Yet even then, if the Lord tarries, the church must be about the ongoing task of making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in God’s tri-personal name, and teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded.

It remains, however, to answer the question, “How might one assess various tools, strategies, and methodologies for their Great Commission appropriateness?” While this essay must leave the analysis of particular strategies and tools to individual practitioners, it will seek to offer some

⁶⁷ Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2011), 35–36. Smith and Kai advocate for changing the word “disciple” to the word “trainer” as it more accurately fits their understanding of what a disciple should do. Likewise, as noted above, McGavran had long ago bifurcated discipleship and what he called perfecting, allowing a much faster, though unfortunately shallower, understanding of discipleship to pervade his suggestions in *The Bridges of God*, 15.

⁶⁸ Chan and Beuving, *Multiply*, 32.

guiding questions that will aid in such assessment. At the very least this essay has two remaining questions to answer: What is the role of the cultural outsider? How does one equip a people sufficiently to carry on the discipleship task itself?

The Role of the Cultural Outsider

As the church obeys the Great Commission, at least some will be sent to peoples of the earth who are currently far removed from the opportunity to become disciples of Christ geographically, culturally, and religiously. Though this cultural distance will undoubtedly complicate the relationships between such missionaries and the people to whom they are sent, worship of God by way of obedience to the Great Commission is sufficient warrant for embracing the challenge. Having determined that intercultural missions is theoretically appropriate, one must now begin to work practically toward Great Commission obedience.

One of the first questions to be asked is, "What role should a missionary play in the disciple-making and church forming process?" Some strategies treat missionaries merely as trainers or managers who are tasked with finding pragmatic ways of passing on information and seeing that it is disbursed quickly and efficiently by trainees.⁶⁹ As the missionary goes out in obedience to the Great Commission, however, it is not only the method and tools, but also the understanding of the missionary's role, that must align with the Great Commission.

A much more appropriate alternative to the pragmatist or paternalist options mentioned above is Lesslie Newbigin's perspective on the role of a missionary as the initiator of a dialogue between "the traditional culture, the 'Christianity' of the missionary, and the Bible."⁷⁰ While various mod-

⁶⁹ Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 126. Borthwick highlights Western pragmatism saying, "Westerners are more likely to be eager to do things speedily. . . . I think we are too readily seduced by the worldly and in fact humanist assumption that we can fix everything through our own efforts." Likewise, David Bosch maligns this kind of thinking pointing out that much of the contemporary evangelical missionary atmosphere is the result of the Enlightenment-born optimism which saw unreached peoples as "solvable" projects and problems (*Transforming Mission*, 343). See also Andy Johnson, "Pragmatism, Pragmatism Everywhere!," *9Marks*, <http://9marks.org/article/pragmatism-pragmatism-everywhere/>.

⁷⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 97.

els of initiation exist, the basic idea charts a middle way between the missionary as a manager or trainer and the missionary as an authoritarian.⁷¹ This dialogue allows the Bible to have ultimate authority and the missionary to engage life-on-life with the local disciples, and it teaches basic hermeneutical skills through the ongoing three-way conversation between two cultural representatives who are sitting under the Bible and allowing it to shape them as they discuss its meaning and implications together.

Perhaps one helpful guiding question that a missionary might ask of his or her strategy is this: “Does this strategy allow me a role in which I can disciple local believers in a contextually appropriate and biblically faithful way so that they are developed, empowered, and released as disciple-maker makers?” It is imperative that the tools used in discipleship are neither so complex nor so simplistic that the new believers and newly forming churches cannot use them to develop as disciples on their own. Rote learning and training will not suffice. Disciples need to be equipped to study, understand, and broadly apply the Scriptures and the kingdom principles found therein to their lives, their churches, and their communities. This study will conclude by offering some initial questions with which to assess various missions methods and tools.

Minimally Trained or Sufficiently Equipped

One contemporary concern is the use of methodology that utilizes minimalistic content to achieve maximum spread. David Sills cautions against a strategy that prioritizes speed over total obedience: “When speed becomes the driving force and heartbeat of a strategy, and expediency rules decision making, nonessentials are jettisoned as impediments to progress.”⁷² Sills goes on to give an illustration whereby he compares strategies based on speed to jet-boats and Great Commission strategies as freighters. While a jet-boat can cover a lot of territory, it does so at the expense of an ability to carry needed freight.

As has been the burden of this essay, a primary question to ask of any potential methodology is this: “How faithful is this tool in helping me to obey the Great Commission and to disciple others to do likewise?” Several additional questions will offer more specific help in answering this larger question.

⁷¹ A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012). For the missionary interested in a full treatment of this topic, Moreau’s book is to be commended.

⁷² Sills, *Reaching and Teaching*, 32.

Does This Method Produce Churches of Disciple-Making Disciples?

This study has sought to show that Matt 24:14 and the completion of world evangelization are not sufficient to exhaust the church's mission. Strategies geared toward reaching the world's last UPGs must result in making disciples among them, baptizing them into churches, and teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded. Failing to equip and empower new converts to deepen in discipleship raises the alarming question,

What if we reach all the people groups that we consider to be unreached and yet He [Jesus] delays His return for fifty years, or five hundred years, or five thousand years? What will happen to all of the people who have heard the gospel, raised their hand to pray a prayer, and then watched the dust of the missionary's vehicle as he sped away to the next people group?⁷³

One must assess a potential strategy or tool by its capacity to generate healthy and holistic disciples that make disciples.

As these disciples grow in number, a Great Commission-based method will also form churches, baptizing new believers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is a church of true disciples that will bring about well-rounded disciple-making communities who bring kingdom influence to bear on their society. Bill Hull and Renaut van der Riet see the whole church as necessary in the process of discipleship, saying,

No individual can fully disciple another, because no one has the full arsenal of spiritual gifts and wisdom to adequately bring another to maturity in Christ. . . . Only the body of Christ can provide an environment that gives the full range of experiences and challenges I need.⁷⁴

To this point, Great Commission-based church planting models should encourage a whole range of gift-development within the churches planted. This diverse, corporate development may not occur if the tools employed only equip the evangelists and those with apostolic tendencies.

Does This Method Teach and Equip for Total Obedience?

This Great Commission calls the church to teach obedience to everything Jesus commanded. This requires a minimum of two things: (1) he or she must teach an attitude of obedience to Jesus grounded in gratitude for grace; and (2) the methods he or she uses must equip local disciples

⁷³ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁴ Bill Hull and Renaut van der Riet, *The Disciple-Making Church: Leading a Body of Believers on the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 35.

with the necessary tools for engaging, understanding, and applying the Word of God so that they might have access to all that Jesus commanded.

Additionally, obedience to Christ involves participation in the kingdom of God. As Howard Snyder points out, “Jesus defines making disciples as ‘teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you’ (Matt. 28:20). What Jesus taught, above all, was the kingdom of God.”⁷⁵ To this point, some have adopted the language of “kingdom outposts” as a component of the very definition of church.⁷⁶ While the church must never neglect its role as a worshipping community, it is also a social community tasked with bringing the kingdom to bear on the communities in which its people live. A missionary must consider whether or not a method contains encouragement to local churches to invest in kingdom projects and to apply the gospel within their communities.

Therefore, prior to employing a method, strategy, or tool, a missionary should ask, “Will this approach eventually result in disciples that can deepen in their understanding, teaching, and application of Scripture without my further input?” While this question deals with the end of one’s ministry, it should be asked from the beginning in order to ensure that the outcome of the missionary’s labor, as far as it depends on human effort and strategy, is disciples who are no longer dependent on the missionary for spiritual growth and ongoing disciple-making.

Finally, as with all theology, a particular method or tool for missions work must be assessed based on its ability to bring out the beauty of the gospel.⁷⁷ The Great Commission involves bringing the greatest news to those who need it in order that they might become the disciples of Jesus the Savior. Dean Flemming, in his book *Why Mission*, explains the beauty of the Great Commission task saying,

Mission leans into God’s future. Jesus’ charge to make disciples ‘until the end of the age’ (Matt 28:20) means that *we*, the church in mission, are drawn into Matthew’s story. *We* are the disciples who are sent, with the abiding presence of the authoritative Lord, to form communities of disciples who embody the life of Jesus, even as we await the day when God’s kingdom comes in its fullness, on

⁷⁵ Howard Snyder, “A Renewal Response,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: 5 Views*, ed. Elmer L. Towns and Gary McIntosh, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 63.

⁷⁶ Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 8.

⁷⁷ David Bently Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 21.

earth as it is in heaven!⁷⁸

Stated this way, the church is not left with a task that she can complete, but a story in which she might participate until Jesus' return. Let it be that her missions methods might fully embody and display that story and, in so doing, invite others into complete participation therein.

Conclusion

Matthew 24:14 expectantly records the Lord Jesus' promise that "the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" before the end will come. It is his sure word, and in it his people have confidence. However, as has been demonstrated in this paper, his people also have a commission that is grander than this promise. Matthew 24:14 will be fulfilled in the Lord's timing as he uses his people to obey the command with which he has left them in Matt 28:18–20. Only upon Jesus' return might it be said that the work of the Great Commission is finished.⁷⁹ This will not be completed because of something the church has done to hurry him along, but because Christ has ceased to tarry. In the interim, as has been demonstrated, the church is called to make disciples, not to make Jesus come back.

Let it not be that, in right compassion for the lost and unreached among the nations, missiologists develop strategies and tools that fall short of full obedience to the command by which the Lord has commissioned his people to expand his kingdom. To that end, this essay humbly suggests that missionary tools, methods, and strategies be assessed not by their potential to "Finish the Great Commission," but by their potential to "Obey the Great Commission."

⁷⁸ Dean E. Flemming, *Why Mission?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 22.

⁷⁹ Hull and van der Riet, *The Disciple-Making Church*, 21.